

Remarks at the National Governors Association Winter Meeting
February 10, 2023

The President. Please, please sit—sit down. I told Governor Murphy once, every time I hear "the President of the United States," I look around and say, "Where the hell is he?" [*Laughter*] How's it going?

Anyway, it's great to see you all. Sorry to keep you waiting. Look, I think we have a lot to cover. And quite frankly, you know, I think the success for all of us—Democrats and Republicans—is in part going to be measured by not what else we get done or passed, but what we—whether we we're able to implement what we've already done.

I know it's a problem having to deal with all the money we're sending you. [*Laughter*] And I understand that. But—[*laughter*—you all think I'm kidding. I think it is part of our problem. [*Laughter*]

Anyway, but what I'm going to do is—I'm going to be quiet, right? And I'm going to turn it over to you.

Director of the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs Julie Chavez Rodriguez. Thank you, Mr. President—

The President. And then, eventually, I'm going to say something to you. [*Laughter*] Okay? Good to see you, Senator—Governor Cox.

Director Rodriguez. Well, thank you so much, Mr. President. And welcome, Governors, to the White House again this year. It's my honor to welcome you all again.

And as you all know, the Biden-Harris administration has been focused on really laying out a strong, resilient economic recovery, and one that is also inclusive: an economy where work is rewarded, where equal pay isn't optimal [optional; White House correction], and our small businesses continue to flourish and remain the backbone of our economy.

And last year, when we came together, we talked about how we hit the ground running. And today I'm excited to bring us together again to report on the progress that we've made to date.

But before we get started with the President and the Vice President, I wanted to turn it over to NGA's vice chair, Spencer Cox, from the State of Utah.

Spencer.

National Governors Association Vice Chair Governor Spencer J. Cox of Utah. Thank you very much, Mr. President, Madam Vice President. Thank you for hosting us again. We're excited to be back in the White House with you. We're grateful for all the work that's been done.

We—you may know this: We just spent some time with your Cabinet members and some of your senior advisers. They were incredibly helpful. We thank them.

I just want to thank you, Mr. President, for your sacrifice and the sacrifice of your family in serving our country. As chief executives, we understand a little bit the pressure that you face—

The President. You understand. [*Laughter*]

Gov. Cox. —the long nights, the hard days, the big decisions that you have to make. And we honor and respect your service to our country.

I will just remind you that you are in a room full of the—my wife said I can't use my "farm words"—so the get-stuff-done caucus. *[Laughter]* Governors get stuff done. I know you—we've heard you refer to Mitch as the "hurry the hell up to get stuff done." *[Laughter]* So we are partners with you in getting that stuff done, and we look forward to working closely with you.

Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. Well, thanks, Gov.

Director Rodriguez. And now we'll hear from our Vice President.

Madam Vice President.

Vice President Kamala D. Harris. Thank you. Good morning to all of you, and thank you for your work. As the President has said, ours, together, is a partnership for the benefit of the American people.

And having a background as a State attorney general, I have some sense of the work that you all do every day in terms of meeting the needs of the diversity of your State, implementing policy in a way that actually hits the ground and has meaning and a direct impact on the families and in the individuals who you serve. So I thank you for your work.

As you all know, the accomplishments that President Biden mentioned in his State of the Union were possible because of your partnership. From the very first days of our administration, during the height of the pandemic, I recall the many meetings by Zoom that we had with so many of you who are here, where you gave us a very accurate sense of what you needed and what the people of your State needed.

Definitely the priorities at the moment were formed by the immediacy of the pandemic. But you also talked with us about longstanding issues that your face—your State has faced when it comes to, for example, roads and bridges; when it comes to the need to have access to high-speed internet; when you knew that the economic fabric of your State relied on your small businesses and what they needed not only in terms of immediate relief during the pandemic, but what they need to not only survive and thrive as we move forward, in particular with the policies that our administration has emphasized when it comes to, for example, a clean energy economy and what we can do to grow our economy by thinking innovatively about what the future will require us to do today. So I want to thank you all for that.

We delivered on many of these needs by making transformative investments that President Biden will highlight, and it includes our work to implement the largest investment in climate in our Nation's history.

We calculate that, in addition to \$370 billion that was part of the Inflation Reduction Act, overall, we're probably looking at about \$1 trillion that will hit the streets of America to address this pressing issue.

And again, it will be your leadership that allows us to invest in families, in workers, collaborate with the private sector, and do the work that is not only about meeting the direct needs when it comes to the climate crisis and extreme weather conditions, but what we uniquely can do as the United States of America to be a model for the world around how we invest in our people and invest in our future.

None of this work can happen were it not for you being there in the statehouses, seeing this through. And we're very proud of this because we do think of this moment as being transformative. We do think of this moment as being the moment in the history of our Nation where it is not about incrementalism, it is truly about jumping to a new plateau.

And again, it will require your leadership every day to make our policies and our vision real. So I thank you for that.

In the past year, I've met with 35 Governors. Just this year, I've been to nine States in 5 weeks, and I've had the opportunity to do what I intend to continue to do, which is to lift up your leadership.

I underscored recently, for example, in North Carolina with Governor Cooper, the work that we are doing to support CDFIs—community banks—which support small businesses, both in their creation, but also in their growth.

Governor Josh Shapiro and I were together with the President in Pennsylvania to talk about what we need to do to implement our policy of, in the next 9 years now, removing all lead pipes and service lines in our Nation, which has the benefit of not only allowing the work to happen—which means supporting the workers who do that—but also understanding the direct impact to public health and public education, in that, of course, the toxic water coming through those lead pipes has a direct impact on the ability of our children to learn.

The work that we have been doing includes the work that was a part of my visit yesterday to Minnesota. Governor Walz, I talked about you. Where are you? I talked about you, mentioning that you were here, but your extraordinary leadership as a Governor in passing legislation, working with your legislature, in a way that will be a model around how States can actually reduce greenhouse gas emissions, all the while still allowing a transition into a clean energy economy.

So this is the work we will continue to do over the course of this year.

And in conclusion, I'll say that, for so many of us and certainly for me, I think that the theme of this year should be, for all of us, momentum. And this is not a partisan point. There is so much good and important work that happened over the last 2 years as a very specific moment in time in our country. An era, if you will, not just a political season.

And we are now at a point—we're coming through the height of the crisis—but with the good work that has been done to deal with an immediate issue that required long-term thinking, we are now on the verge of building on that in a way that, together through a partnership, will benefit the people of our country for generations.

So I thank you each for your work. And to Governor Murphy and Governor Cox, thank you for your leadership of this important organization.

Thank you.

Director Rodriguez. And I'd now like to turn it over to the chair of NGA, Governor Murphy from New Jersey.

National Governors Association Chair Governor Philip D. Murphy of New Jersey. Thank you, Julie. Mr. President, Madam Vice President, I echo Governor Cox's humility and honor with which we come this morning. Thank you so much for hosting us so graciously.

We had a really good discussion, prior to your coming in, about the many accomplishments that you've achieved—the Biden-Harris administration has achieved—over the past couple of years: the Inflation Reduction Act, the bipartisan infrastructure law, the CHIPS law—the last—second and third of those that the NGA full-throatedly bipartisan support. And we are in the midst of implementation, as you well know. And it's a game—these are game changers.

We were—Mitch and Mr. President, Kathy Hochul, and I were together a couple of weeks ago in New York. Seventy thousand jobs on that one project alone. So these are game-changing investments in our country.

We had a good discussion, I might also add, about workforce development. Governor Gianforte is going to lead us tomorrow in a discussion with business leaders about how we can prime the pump and get more workers into that pipeline. But a really good discussion.

I thank you as well for your focus on mental health. One of the initiatives that we have is strengthening mental health among our kids, focusing on infant and maternal health as well, as a part of that. And deep, deep thanks for your leadership and support in all those endeavors.

I'd say, lastly, we had an executive committee meeting yesterday. There were about 9 or 10 of us, both parties. And I think there's a certain pride that we have in the National Governors Association that, notwithstanding our political parties or differences, we can consistently come together and disprove the narrative that politics has gotten completely divisive. And I say that on behalf of a roomful of both Democratic and Republican chief executives.

Again, we're incredibly honored to be here. And thank you for having us.

The President. Well, Gov, thanks. And you know, we're honored to have you all. You guys make the trains run on time, figuratively speaking. Without you, none of this works. I mean, I really mean it. None of it works.

And one of the things we have to do this year is, we have, in a sense, a little—almost too much to work with, because we've got a lot we've got to get done that we've already passed, so not even talking about new legislation, just what has already been passed.

And you know, I know a lot of folks like to—in both our parties—and the talking heads like to say there's not bipartisanship. Seventy-five percent of what we did would not have happened without flat bipartisan.

We would not have a 1-trillion-200-billion-dollar infrastructure bill. That was a bipartisan initiative—real—and with many of you Governors helping us push it over the line.

We would not be in a position with the CHIPS Act, which is going to invest over \$300 billion in the near term in the United States making these chips and growing the economy. That was a bipartisan effort.

And we go down the list.

And so I just think that one of the things we have a chance to do this year is disprove that this is—we're just a broken system, that we're divided, we're just based on extremes in both parties and we can't get anything done.

And you know, the—I was just up in Wisconsin with Governor Evers going around the country, like the Vice President is meeting with a lot of you all, and trying to figure out how we get done—how we implement what we've finished.

For example, I asked a former Governor—and by the way, if you noticed, I hired a lot of Governors in my Cabinet—Granholm, Raimondo, Vilsack, et cetera—because you know how to get things done. And that's most of what we have to do now.

It seems to me that when I came to office, to state the obvious, the pandemic was raging. And it was—it wasn't anybody's particular fault; it was just raging. And—but we acted. We came together. And a lot of Governors helped a great deal in terms of getting some of the acting together.

And, granted, at the beginning, it was—we didn't have a—we didn't have unanimity in what to do. But we passed a little thing that was about a trillion 800 billion dollars called the recovery act, and it pulled an awful lot of people out of real deep trouble.

Most of you were in situations—not all—were in situations where your revenues were drying up because of the pandemic. Things were shutting down. You were having to lay off first responders, teachers, nurses, doctors, et cetera. And we were able to get, across the board for Democrats and Republicans, an awful lot of immediate help so you didn't have to shut things down.

And you know, it's—and so one of the results is that—and it's not because of me or the Vice President or this administration by any stretch alone, but we created 12 million jobs. No—that's never happened before in this period of time, in a 2-year period. Twelve million real-live jobs. The lowest unemployment rate in 50 years. And with your help, we went from 3.5 million people vaccinated to 230 million people vaccinated.

And you know, I know, like—I knew, like you did, that strengthening the State and local governments was the key to our recovery. And I'm not being—it's not hyperbole; it's a fact. That's how it has to work.

When I came to office, half of you were planning painful cuts. Your revenues were projected to be reduced by 3 percent. Well, you know, that's why we spent \$350 billion for the first time in history and for—to every State, city, county, you shore up your budgets, your painful layoffs. You put a lot of cops back to work. You put a lot of teachers back to work. Go down the list. I won't bore you with the detail because you've forgotten more about it than anybody else knows.

And State revenues grew by 16 percent in this period of time, on average. And we urged you to use the money, and most of you did, that you got from the recovery act to make your community safer, deal with affordable housing, get small businesses back on their feet, train your workforce. And you did. You did it.

And we provided \$12 billion to address those mental health needs at the front end. There's more to come, but \$12 billion.

Because when you think about it, folks—and I know you all—we all know it; we don't—I don't think we think about it that much—that there are about—for every one of the 1 million people died from COVID, there are—the experts tell me there are nine close people to them. Nine people were affected by their loss.

And so there's an awful lot of empty chairs at that dining room table being stared at. And it brings back, every single time, who's gone—your son, your daughter, your husband, your wife, your brother, your sister, whatever.

And so—well, one of the things we did was—and it was Governor Murphy's prodding—to move in a significant way to deal with the mental health problems, and they're real. And we knew it wasn't enough, so we took this Bipartisan Safer Communities Act and provided another \$10 billion to you all for—to prevent violence and treat resulting trauma.

You know, a lot of what everyone from police to citizens are going through is no different than posttraumatic stress the military is going through. I mean, it's real. It's consequential. Two billion of that was for young people in particular, to pay for things like school counselors.

And under our unity agenda, in the State of the Union, I called on a surge of resources to deal with the fentanyl epidemic. We've seized over 23,000 pounds of fentanyl that—thousands of Americans are dying every day from fentanyl. And—but we have—just in the last several months.

And look, folks, we also have to rebuild the country. And you know, whether it was the infrastructure law—I was with Andy Beshear and Governor DeWine—I don't know where Governor DeWine is. I'm sure you're here somewhere, I just don't see you.

And you know, there's a little bridge across the Ohio River. You know, it's only going to cost about a billion-seven to do it—[laughter]—but we're—it's 60 years old. And it's—more commerce goes across that bridge than you can imagine. It's, you know, one-point—anyway.

Without going on—you all know the detail, but the end result is, in a bipartisan way, the Governors and the Senators of both States got together, and we're building a new bridge and fixing the one that's there. But it's consequential. There's a—it's the second most productive bridge in terms of product that goes across the bridge of any in America.

And you know, we've had—we've seen some spirited debate. But the point of this is, we can do—we were able to do all this and still cut the deficit by a trillion 700 billion dollars in the last 2 years, the largest deficit reduction in history.

And you may have—we had somewhat of a debate in the State of the Union. And—but I was glad to see everybody says we're not going to cut Social Security and Medicare. I noticed that happened, but I hope that's true. But that's what we—anyway, look, one of the things that we're going to have to focus on is that we want to take—it sounds like there is some discussion to take defense spending off the table, so we can't discuss that. And if you do that, you'll have to cut nothing much but programs. But you know, we can cut an awful lot by just doing what we already passed.

You know, the fact is that the—I know a lot of you aren't that crazy about the legislation we passed that allows Medicare to negotiate for drug prices. Well, guess what? That's going to reduce the Federal debt. That's going to reduce the Federal debt billions of dollars—\$247 billion reduction in the debt by doing it. And it's going to reduce the prices.

Why? Because Medicare had to pay—you're going to have to pay \$240 billion less, and people are going to get the drugs they need and they can afford.

So it's not that we're—that we're in a position we're saying we're not going to cut the deficit. There's an example: a quarter of a billion—of a trillion dollars. So that's not bad, for a start.

But my point is this: I believe we can be fiscally responsible without threatening our country or dealing with any chaos. You know, 25 percent of the entire national debt that was accumulated over 200 years occurred over the previous 4 years. It increased the national debt—over 200 years of accumulated debt—by 25 percent in the previous 4 years before we came into office.

And you know—and now there's talk—and I don't think it's going to happen; I don't think my colleagues are really serious about it—I hope they're not—about holding the debt hostage to cuts they want to make and certain things that I may or may not want to make.

And we've never reneged on our debt. Our credit has been good for well over 200 years. Not one single time. But remember, this debt we're talking about, it accumulated over 200 years. It's not—it didn't—it didn't occur in the last little bit. Now, granted, it went up by a quarter 4 years ago.

But—so there's a lot we can do. It's—I think that we're going to pay our bills.

Look, we've gotten a historic amount of legislation passed. And I'll end this by saying that, as all of you know, it doesn't stop here. I think we have to finish the job.

For example, when we were debating whether or not to cut the cost of prescription drugs for those on Medicare, well, I thought we should do it across the board. Why should the 220,000 kids who are—need insulin and are young kids, why should they pay 400, 500 bucks a month when now seniors are only going to pay 50—35 bucks a month? By the way, it costs 10 bucks to make that insulin; package it, another 3.

And so, look, there's a lot we can do. I hope we can get together to finish the job on some of the things we have to do. A lot more to do, a lot more to say, but I'm anxious to hear from all of you.

So, as my mother would say, I'm going to hush up and turn it back to Julie. And you tell me what we're doing.

Director Rodriguez. Great. Thank you so much, Mr. President. And at this point, we'll ask press to leave the room and get into our Q&A. I also want to take this opportunity to——

[At this point, the meeting continued; no transcript was provided.]

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:34 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary of Energy Jennifer M. Granholm, in her former capacity as Governor of Michigan; Secretary of Commerce Gina M. Raimondo, in her former capacity as Governor of Rhode Island; Secretary of Agriculture Thomas J. Vilsack, in his former capacity as Governor of Iowa; Gov. Andrew G. Beshear of Kentucky; Gov. Mike DeWine of Ohio; Sens. A. Mitchell McConnell, Randal H. Paul, and Sherrod C. Brown; and former Sen. Robert J. Portman. Gov. Cox referred to his wife Abby Palmer Cox; and Infrastructure Act Implementation Coordinator Mitchell J. Landrieu. Gov. Murphy referred to Gov. Kathleen C. Hochul of New York; and Gov. Gregory R. Gianforte of Montana.

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